

Tibet sheds light on the mystery of Mycenae

Domini Hogg

Tibet help us to understand the mysterious bronze-age world of Mycenaean Greece? Domini Hogg thinks so.

Can the palace culture of present-day Mycenaean Greece was not in the forefront of my mind (despite what my friends might think) as I set off for Tibet, a land shrouded in the mystery of the world's largest mountain range. But, emerging from the final tunnel before Lhasa, I was met with the sudden and imposing view of the Potala palace perched atop a mound amid a bustling city. As a recent Classics graduate I could not help but be reminded of Mycenae, the bronze age fortified palace complex in the north-east Peloponnese of Greece that lends its name to the Mycenaean epoch of Greek history (c. 1600–1100 B.C.).

Mycenae and its sister palaces were, like the Potala palace, well-fortified buildings built atop hillocks that would have loomed impressively over the city below. My brain was buzzing as it connected the dots. Could the Potala palace (below) offer us a near-contemporary model to help solve the archaeological conundrums of Mycenaean Greece?

The mystery of Mycenae

Mycenaean civilization remains for the most part a mystery to scholars, who have moved on from the 19th century interest in trying to prove a connection between the palace sites and Homeric characters like Agamemnon. Currently there is no consensus as to how the Mycenaean palaces were used, whether the palaces were unified under Mycenae, or how the palatial authorities maintained control. In my experience comparative studies tend to reveal new approaches to old and stagnating questions and can overthrow long-standing assumptions. I wondered whether comparison with Tibetan palaces could throw light on the Mycenaean ones.

Archaeological investigation of Mycenaean palace complexes has looked at their functions as active ritual, governmental, and industrial centres. Evidence for residential use, however, is relatively sparse. In none of the Mycenaean palaces are there any rooms that were clearly used for residential purposes. We have very

little evidence of royal accessories, which, most probably made of stone or metal, we would expect to survive. Most of the palace ground floor, however, seems to have been used by much larger numbers of people than could constitute a royal family. The 'Palace of Nestor' at Pylos, for example, contained large quantities of broken pottery cups, which indicates that a public ritual took place there shortly before the destruction.

The presence of oil jars and tools for making perfume at Pylos and half-worked pieces of ivory at Mycenae suggests that they were also the workplace for numerous craftsmen. While it is possible that the royal family lived on the first floor, of which nothing now remains, at Pylos there is evidence that at least some of the upper floor was also used for storage, since the shattered remains of oil jars from the floor above have been found amongst the remains of the room below. If the palaces were royal residences and the residential area was private, this area must have been a relatively small part of the whole structure and in no way more elaborate than the public part.

A comparison with Tibet

As we ascended the steps to the Potala palace in Lhasa our guide was explaining how it was divided into two parts: the white part was for the government; the red part for the temples and the tombs of previous Dalai Lamas. The Dalai Lama and his monks lived in the white palace. Historically the Dalai Lamas have served not only religious functions but also as political and military leaders. The Potala's white palace reminds us of these roles. Its steep white-washed walls and dearth of windows lower down is an impressive sight and would have helped to protect the Dalai Lama during times of war. Inside the palace tax would have been collected, government decisions made, and monks, who also lived there, would have gone about their work. Tibetan monks have to learn ten different subjects including medicine, astronomy, and drama. The

palaces and temples are painted and maintained by the monks. In the past every family was expected to send at least one boy and sometimes a girl to a monastery. This was the only form of education available and consequently the only means of improving social status.

This, too, sounded like a good fit for Mycenaean palace civilization. The clay tablet palace records, written in proto-Greek using a syllabic script called Linear B (first deciphered in the 1950s) preserve an important documentary record of Mycenaean palace life, albeit a snapshot of a particular time period. They suggest that the palaces were the working place for various scribes, who accounted for staple goods received as tax, the craftsmen's pay, and where soldiers were posted. They tell us that the palace was supporting a number of craftsmen even outside the palace. It has been suggested on the basis of their low pay and the Homeric Greek word meaning 'slave' that occurs on the Linear B tablets (left, an example from Pylos) that these craftsmen were slaves. However, a number of 'slaves' seem to have also been paid well and even to have owned their own land. Perhaps these slaves were actually voluntary workers that accepted low wages in exchange for the education and religious fulfilment provided, like the families in Tibet who looked to the palaces to improve their children's social status. If they were successful they might improve their family's social status and be rewarded with a portion of the 'religious' or 'secular' land. A connection between handicrafts and religion in the Mycenaean world is supported by archaeological evidence, since Mycenaean cult centres and craft workshops are often found side by side.

Palace-capitals and regional centres

The Potala palace, the world's highest and largest castle palace, once governed an enormous kingdom in the Himalaya area roughly comparable with modern-day Saudi Arabia. Travelling along the Friendship Highway in our four-wheel drive, we were able to get a feel for how vast it would have been. Barren hills, soaring snow peaks and turquoise lakes

followed one after another. And in the valleys unexpectedly fertile plains sprang up between the sand dunes.

Arriving in the town of Shigatse, we caught a glimpse of a mini Potala palace, the Shigatse 'dzong' or 'fortress'. (Legend has it that the architect wanted to copy the Potala palace exactly so he carved the shape of the palace into a carrot and took it back to Shigatse, but when he got there he discovered that the carrot had dried up and shrunk, hence why the Shigatse dzong looks like a miniature Potala palace!)

Many dzongs, such as the Gyantse dzong, even if they do not pretend to mimic the Potala palace, clearly belong to the same architectural tradition with steeply sloped outside walls and windows concentrated in the upper levels. Dzongs never included temples but served as the seats of regional government and local tax collection points. Since tax took the form of staple goods that were not easy to transport over long distances, it would first be collected locally and then a proportion of it would be sent back to central government.

Could a similar arrangement have existed in the Mycenaean world? The difference between Mycenaean palaces and the less elaborate, regional *megaron* halls, where Linear B tablets have also been found, might offer a parallel to Tibet's palace centres and regional dzongs. Mycenaean palaces often contain a central *megaron*-like structure, and the Lion Gate at Mycenae, which shows a column as well as the famous lions, reminds us of the power of architecture to convey ideas of central power and identity, in Mycenae as in Tibet.

We must also wonder whether, even though all the Mycenaean palaces were clearly active ritual centres, only one of them, Mycenae, was the residence of the supreme leader referred to in the Linear B tablets as 'wanax'. While the later Homeric epics name a number of characters (most frequently the Mycenaean king Agamemnon) as 'anax' (N.B. the similarity of the word), the contemporary Hittite texts (from a neighbouring power in what is now Turkey) name only one representative of an area that most probably refers to the whole of Mycenaean Greece.

In addition, Mycenae is by far the wealthiest Mycenaean citadel and seems to have monopolized the most luxurious industries such as gold and ivory carving, while the palace at Pylos specialized in textiles and perfume. This craft specialization indicates a degree of central control and the pre-eminence of Mycenae within the Mycenaean world. The proximity of the palaces at Tiryns and Midea to such a powerful centre as Mycenae suggests that at least some of the palaces were not rival states, but subordinate regional centres – like the dzongs of Tibet.

How do you pay for it all?

Yaks (or 'drees' if female) are everywhere in Tibet. They are stronger than cows, produce large quantities of wool and excellent cheese and yoghurt, and, when their time has come, enough meat to feed a family for at least three months! In the past Tibet's main trade with India came through yak-wool and salt. Yet this poor economy does not tally with the stunning gilded statues and paintings in the Potala palace and monasteries.

I asked our guide how the Tibetan economy could support the construction of such an elaborate palace. The answer: voluntary contribution. The Tibetan people were so supportive of the Dalai Lama that many came voluntarily to donate whatever they could and help in the construction of the palace. In fact belief was so strong that when the fifth Dalai Lama died in 1682 before the construction was completed the Regent had to keep his death hidden for thirteen years out of fear that the people would not finish the building if they knew of his death.

It is difficult to see how the Mycenaean elite supported the construction of such impressive palaces, but perhaps they exerted a similar religious control over their populace as the fifth Dalai Lama did. Our limited respect for politicians today may make this seem incredible, but Tibetan history provides the proof of its possibility.

The model of the Tibetan Dalai Lama, a loved and respected leader, combining religious, political, and (until recently) military power in one integrated central government, presiding over a significant geographic area, may give us a revealing vision of how the Mycenaean palaces may really have functioned. The danger, of course, is that we will end up with visions of Agamemnon, reciting Buddhist mantras in an incense-filled room surrounded by yak butter sculptures, but then where would archaeology be without a little bit of imagination?

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